

## Media in Stages: NYC Performance Festivals 2012

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It's officially the age of media on stage. Well, maybe not officially, but that was certainly my feeling after seeing 12 shows, 2 films, and a couple of installations over 10 days of simultaneous theatre festivals in New York this January.

The *New York Times* called reported it as "[January is the coolest month onstage](#)" and indeed it was. Coinciding with the Association of Performing Arts Presenters 2012 Conference (APAP), 3 downtown theatres and performance centers mounted spectacularly diverse and compelling festivals: [PS122](#) curated the [Coil Festival](#); the [Public Theater](#) presented its annual [Under the Radar Festival](#); and the [Abrons Arts Center](#) organized the [American Realness Festival](#). Although not every performance worked in and off of media, the trend of recording, projecting, projecting records and recording projections was unmistakable across the three festivals. I wasn't able to see everything (I missed, for example, Temporary Distortion's latest "Newyorkland, although hopefully video documentation from the Seattle performance at [ontheboards.tv](#) will be available soon), but saw enough to register some thoughts about the profound influence, even inescapable, influence of media on contemporary performance. I've written a bit about two productions in terms of history and historiography already in a [post](#) for the Digital Humanities Initiative blog at UB, so I'll focus here on two productions that engage the media in ways less concerned with history than with the experience of life in the contemporary moment.

In many performances, the influence of media is clearly a structuring principle and explicitly marked. One of my favorite performances from the excessive show attendance was Big Art Group's newest show *Broke House* (2012), presented as part of the American Realness Festival at the Abrons Art Center.

The performance is in keeping with other Big Art performances that draw from popular culture (often "cult") references within a narrative structure dictated and realized by and through media. *Broke House*, for example, ruminates on the American economic and housing crisis (the house is "broke" as are the people in it) through one long video feed that manages to invoke not only reality TV and its perverse notions of the domestic spaces (e.g., "Big Brother" and the like), but also references to Chekhov's *Three Sisters* and Grey Gardens, two other famously "broken homes." For example, the characters include echoes of Chekhov's sister, including Manny (Masha), Rey Rey (Irene) and Olga locked in the attic throughout and appearing only in the closing moments as a face projected on cardboard attached to a moving dolly.

Following this seemingly improvised family (the relationships are self-consciously queered but never clearly explained) the camera haunts the house both as a character (the camera operator interacts mostly as an invited



"Broke House" at the Abrons Art Center. Photo: Caden Manson

and even desired guest) and as recording device that tracks the inhabitants of a home clearly falling apart. What begins as a kind of introduction to the living quarters—rooms constructed on a wooden frames and densely augmented with plastic, cardboard, and other elements suspiciously similar to trash—eventually transforms into the emotional journey of a family torn apart by unfulfilled emotional need and financial despair. Indeed, there is little daylight between these ideas as, for example, one character’s obsession with her Nigerian boyfriend (whom she mistakenly locates in Niagara Falls) and the online money transfers that will bring him “home” any moment. The emotional saga of a family displaced (they are eventually but not surprisingly evicted) and dislodged (the emotional relationships similarly flail and falter) is lit against epic signs that broadcast above the space titles such as “Economy vs. Empathy,” “The De-Realization of Politics,” “Class Struggle,” and “Accumulation.”

This last title articulates the visual embodiment of the painful paradox of American consumption. Forced to leave the house, the characters begin to collect all of the “stuff” they can find—cardboard, plastic, tape, plastic sheeting—literally dismantling the house and transforming themselves into snail-like creatures staggering around under the weight of their consumption. Like many Americans burdened by housing debt, they literally are forced to carry their homes on their backs. It’s a brilliant visual metaphor for the American cycle of desire and accumulation: mass consumption transformed into burdens which cause one to lose a home, but continue to carry the burdens of wanting (i.e., debt, unnecessary stuff, emotional baggage, you name it) in perpetuity.



Signs in "Broke House." Photo: Caden Manson.

Interspersing this inevitable decline are brief live-video vignettes, energetically (even manically) staged “in the style of Paul Verhoeven’s *Showgirls!*” These short sequences have little to do with the narrative with the sound and visuals here are calculated for maximum visceral impact, not clarity of information. The context of *Showgirls* is unmistakably related, however, since that film also plays glamour against reality with the boom-and-bust cycle of Las Vegas (still an epicenter for the housing meltdown) and an endless cycle of desire, competition, and human carnage (the plot of [Showgirls!](#) [1995] is basically the plot of Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s 1950 [All About Eve](#) with strippers). Playing out against the “American realness” of their failures and the loss of, well, everything, the characters’ are carried on only by their media-inspired delusions and fantasies, never really coming to terms with the true cost of their accumulated wants and needs. In the final, dizzying moments of the performance, the video projections shift and extend into the house, filling the theatre’s audience (which is to say, our house) with technicolor glory, while the now-destroyed and unoccupied stage home sits as an empty wooden shell, stripped(!) of even a single shred of mylar.

It’s a poignant allegory, one made all the richer for the prior playfulness of the performance. There’s a double delusion here in which the media-saturated spectacle turns representations of human suffering (i.e., the family’s decline in *Broke House* or the distressingly gratuitous rape scene in *Showgirls!*) into easily consumable entertainment. That we take such aesthetic pleasure in the decline speaks not only to the ways in which those of us in the audience also occupy a broke house.

To be continued...next up TEAM (Theatre for the Emerging American Moment)’s exquisite new musical, *Mission Drift*.

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